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ABSTRACT

This paper offers options to state policymakers interested in a P-16 system of educational reform. P-16 systems are attempts to create a coherent, flexible system of public education that stretches from preschool through the fourth year of college. The range of options for policymakers is broad and depends on existing state programs and plans. The approach to P-16 reform can be incremental-implementing change one step at a time-or comprehensive-introducing change simultaneously across the system. Whichever approach a state chooses, the concept of P-16 education must be widely endorsed and supported. Thus the role of elected and appointed policymakers is vital. Policymakers must define and carry out a strategy to bring about change in the face of tradition and entrenched bureaucracy. Following are some points policymakers should consider when pursuing P-16 reform: (1) Identify needs and articulate a vision; (2) build a consensus around the need to realize the vision; (3) maintain the focus; (4) align the implementation tools; and (5) develop guidelines to administer and oversee the process. State policymakers must provide the leadership and support necessary to address the needs of parents and alleviate the concerns of the education community. (WFA)



**Education Commission
of the States**

State Policy Options To Support a P-16 System of Public Education

By Chris Pipho

A Series of Essays Supported by the MetLife Foundation Change in Education Initiative and The Pew Charitable Trusts

P16

Preschool Through Postsecondary

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Introduction

A growing number of states are examining how they can do a better job of connecting the various levels of the nation's education system – preschool, K-12 and postsecondary – which historically have operated independently of one another. Driving these efforts are new challenges and pressures, including changes in the economy and workplace, demographic shifts, advances in technology and telecommunications. There is also widespread and growing concern over the enormous number of young people who move from one level of the system to the next without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed at that level.

Creating a more integrated, seamless education system involves addressing many complex issues, including standards, testing, teacher education, college admissions policies, governance, funding streams and institutional turf issues. Over the past decade, states have begun to move away from dealing with such issues on a piecemeal basis toward a more comprehensive approach known as "P-16." This term reflects the vision of a coherent, flexible system of public education that stretches from preschool through the fourth year of college or "grade 16," culminating in a baccalaureate degree.

In reality, a P-16 education system is most easily understood when viewed through the eyes of a learner. Guiding a child from early care and education through a university education is many parents' dream. Some parents can visualize the end goal and help make decisions along the way that will benefit the child. These are often parents who have successfully moved from kindergarten through college themselves. Other parents lack an understanding of child development and the benefits of a continuing education.

It is up to state policymakers interested in a P-16 system to provide the leadership and support necessary to address parents' interests and needs, and alleviate any concerns the education community may have.

Getting the Ball Rolling: It's Up to Governors and Legislators

The range of options for policymakers is broad and depends to a great extent on existing state programs and future plans related to the P-16 vision. An incremental approach – starting with, say, early childhood programs – might work best for some states. Other states might choose a more aggressive approach, a P-16 "mega-bill" that rolls all policy, funding, governance and program changes into a comprehensive package.

Whatever course a state chooses to take, the concept of P-16 education has to be widely endorsed and supported. Building such support requires policy leadership. While a variety of groups and constituencies is crucial to acceptance and implementation of the P-16 idea, the key direction can best be supplied by the executive and legislative branches of state government.

The Role of the Governor

A state governor has a bully pulpit that lends itself to the initiation of change. A state-of-the-state address that unfolds the governor's vision of a P-16 education system with a plan for needed legislative changes starts a policy process that cannot be easily ignored. Governors that have the power to make appointments to high-level boards and commissions also can build support for the new ideas into key positions of the system.

The governor's education policy advisor, who ideally has demonstrated leadership in more than one area of education, is another key element in carrying the new ideas forward. A governor also may want to consider creating a new position with a title that includes P-16 education.

Other options include sponsoring a policy audit to identify various opportunities and barriers, or establishing an advisory body to help build the P-16 vision and sell the idea.

The Role of Legislators

Furthering the P-16 concept requires careful planning with the legislative leaders of both political parties. The goal must be to build a vision for the P-16 concept and gain broad support for legislative action.

One approach is a joint resolution calling for an interim study of P-16 education, a step that could help provide a draft of a major reform bill. Placing the leadership for such a study in the hands of majority and minority committee chairmen could foster bipartisan support. An adequate budget for expert witnesses and thorough staff work also would signal to all groups in the education establishment that the legislature considers this an issue of great importance.

One goal of a legislative interim study would be the beginning of a process to gather citizen support. Conducting legislative hearings at different locations in the state, holding hearings in conjunction with state board of education and regents meetings, and using a state TV or fiber-optics network to reach additional people are useful options to explore and use.

Legislators needing more information on the P-16 approach will benefit from an ECS publication aimed specifically at bringing them up to speed on this issue. *What Is P-16 Education? A Primer for Legislators* outlines a framework for legislative P-16 discussions and details the varied approaches used as Georgia, Maryland, Missouri and Oregon started to create their own versions of a P-16 delivery model.

One Step at a Time: The Incremental Approach to P-16

Most of the states trying to create more seamless, integrated systems are doing so incrementally – some working with an explicit P-16 policy agenda, others within a less explicit framework.

New Hampshire, as an example, falls into the latter category. Over the past several years, New Hampshire has, among other things:

- Increased the state's share of funding for public education from 8% to roughly half
- Instituted a statewide school report card
- Launched a major initiative to improve low-performing schools
- Expanded both merit- and need-based scholarship programs
- Improved the transferability of credits between the state's community technical colleges and university system
- Created programs to ease students' transition from high school to postsecondary education, including dual-enrollment options, high-tech career academies and competency-based assessment systems.

Rather than pursuing an explicit P-16 agenda, Governor Jeanne Shaheen worked to muster support for these and other reforms by developing independent, incremental goals at each of the three levels.

When Shaheen was first elected governor, New Hampshire was one of only two states without state-funded kindergarten. She had run on a platform that included public kindergarten and signed the Kindergarten Incentive Program into law a few months into her first term. Since then, she has kept early childhood education a priority in the state, including:

- Pushing for stronger licensing standards for child-care facilities
- Signing a child-care credentialing bill into law, which has given rise to a "career lattice" for child-care providers
- Creating the Governor's Business Commission on Child Care and Early Childhood Education, which engages business and community leaders in developing new strategies and resources
- Establishing a Kids Cabinet, which oversees services ranging from home-visitation programs to public awareness campaigns to advance early care and education.

Shaheen also has supported the development of the Early Learning and Literacy Improvement Initiative, which is currently pending in the state legislature. The initiative would invest new state resources in a comprehensive program linking parent training and support, early childhood provider training and support and K-3 teacher professional development with the goal of ensuring that every child in the state is reading proficiently by the end of grade 3.

In Indiana, another state that is implementing P-16, various policy changes are being made at different levels of the education system, but within the framework of a larger P-16 vision.

Starting with the appointment of an Education Roundtable, Governor Frank O'Bannon has used existing programs and changes to create a P-16 Lifelong Learning Plan. At the lower end of the education spectrum, the plan includes a school readiness program that allows districts the flexibility to offer full-day kindergarten, change the date of entry for kindergarten or offer preschool programs. In elementary school, the Ready to Read initiative includes funding for summer reading programs, reading assessments and tutors for children struggling with reading. At the secondary level, the governor's plan created school report cards to measure graduation rates, attendance rates, test scores and class size. And in higher education, Indiana's plan includes funding increases, investments in technological improvements on college campuses, expanded financial aid for students and incentives for universities and community colleges to work more cooperatively.

A More Comprehensive Approach: Putting Together a P-16 Mega-Bill

While incremental change may be the expedient approach to creating a seamless P-16 education system, some policy leaders see the need for introducing change simultaneously across the system. In this case, policymakers may want to consider putting together a single mega-bill that addresses governance, finance and other issues at all levels of the system, in a coordinated fashion.

Some suggested components of a mega-bill are:

- The creation of a **standards-based report card** that provides a clear picture of students' strengths, weaknesses, achievements and needs, and follows them through the entire P-16 education process
- A **parent information plan** that communicates the P-16 system's expectations of learners, from birth through college or work training
- An **incentive system**, including college tuition assistance, that applies to all students throughout the course of their schooling
- The creation of **standards and tests** designed to facilitate students' transition from one level of the education system to the next
- The creation of a **governance** structure to oversee the process and assure that all elements of the P-16 delivery system are producing demonstrable improvements in student achievement
- Periodic **policy audits** to identify gaps and conflicts in existing policies
- Delineation of major **goals** for each component of the P-16 system.

Standards-Based Report Card

While the term "report card" can be problematic (calling it a "progress card" or a "student status report" are possible alternatives), the intent is to create a mechanism that allows parents and other caregivers to continuously evaluate and meet the needs of learners at all age levels. This report card would differ from a traditional one by showing not only what the student has accomplished, but also what the expectations are for the next level of education.

Parent Information Plan

Parents need an ongoing information system that clarifies the various expectations and options their children will encounter as they move through the education system. Such a system would improve

parents' ability to monitor their children's progress and help them succeed throughout the course of their schooling. It would outline, in some detail, the scope of expectations for each level of the P-16 process. The goal would be to educate parents and give them a role in assisting their child and the school.

Incentive System

A system of incentives could be used to encourage and reward student achievement and parent involvement along the P-16 path. One possible approach is to create a state college-tuition account for each child at birth. The state's investment of a nominal amount of money in such accounts would remind parents and extended family members that preparation for college must start early, and that they all have a role in the education process. The incentives could be expanded and reinforced at critical junctures. For example, a student judged ready for school at age 5 could receive an additional state contribution to the account. Initially, some new funding might be needed, but the goal would be to reduce remediation costs and use those funds for incentives. Shortening high school by two years for some students would provide another source of funds.

Standards and Tests

Each level of education in the P-16 process must flow logically to the next. Parents and students should know what to expect at every level and not find that the rules of the game have changed when they move to a new level. At the early childhood level, parents and educators need some sort of school-readiness assessment they can understand and accept, such as the "APGAR Score" babies receive when they are born. This score, done at one and five minutes after birth, gives parents a quick understanding of how well their baby is doing in critical areas, such as breathing, pulse rate and activity. Linking school readiness to the above-mentioned incentive system might counter concerns over "too much testing, too early."

Governance Changes

A P-16 mega-reform bill also must address the various governance changes needed to create a seamless system of education; making governance changes in one part of the education system without considering the impact on other parts of the system could create unintended consequences. State officials may want to create a single P-16 board of education, a P-16 legislative committee or a strengthened role for the executive branch in P-16 policy.

Policy Audits

Reviewing existing education codes and board policies to determine those that need to be changed or dropped should be an ongoing process. Policy audits can be conducted at certain key points in the design and implementation of a P-16 system, beginning with a legislative interim study and continuing as each component of the system is developed.

Component-by-Component Goals

Putting together a comprehensive bill requires recognition of the crucial interconnectedness of the various components of a P-16 system. The goals and expectations of each component or level of the system must be linked to and build on the preceding component(s).

- ***Early Childhood Component.*** While parents are primarily responsible for children at this stage, their needs and understanding of education's role in their children's lives vary greatly. State support is needed to ensure every child is ready for school by age 5. The current "nonsystem" of early childhood education is a patchwork quilt comprising everything from Head Start programs to expensive private nursery schools. The challenge for states is to create a more coordinated system of services and programs, capable of meeting children and families' diverse needs, and of supporting the goal of school readiness for all children.
- ***K-3 Component.*** Literacy is the primary goal at this level. The consequences are well-known for students who fall short of this goal: they are more likely to lag behind, require remediation and eventually drop out of school, and less likely to function as productive workers and citizens. Adequate resources, incentives and sanctions must be put in place to ensure that all children achieve reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade. Options available to policymakers include: changing per-pupil state aid to districts with large numbers of students not reaching the goal; closing down schools that

fail to meet minimum expectations; and mandatory summer school, after-school and/or tutoring programs for struggling students.

- **Grade 4-6 Component.** At this level, the goal is the development of the basic skills. Achieving grade-level performance should be the target; performing above grade level might be rewarded with money placed in the student's tuition account. Some states already have begun the process of sanctions against schools that fail to meet expectations over time. Standards-based report cards and parent education programs need to be extended to this level. A mandated longer school year may be a useful sanction, and parental noninvolvement should be monitored.
- **Grade 7-8 Component.** A growing body of research points to the critical importance of students' acquisition of mathematics and science skills in these grades, particularly the completion of algebra. At this level, both parents and students should be given specific information about academic expectations in high school and college. Postsecondary institutions could be given incentives for conducting special mentoring programs, academic summer camps and other events that make thinking about high school and college an integral part of students' daily education fare. Under an incentives system, rewards might include money added to the college tuition account of students who complete algebra by the end of 8th grade.
- **Grade 9-10 Component.** Some attention has been given to the idea of restructuring the curriculum to allow students to complete high school by the end of 10th grade. This idea has major implications for community colleges and other postsecondary institutions and raises a basic question: What does it mean to be at an academic level appropriate to begin college? Some states already have had extensive experience with dual-credit programs, and others have created special regional and statewide schools for gifted students. Rewards (in the form of contributions to students' college-tuition accounts) might be given to encourage students to participate in dual-credit courses and to complete high school. The possibility of asking employers to make a tuition contribution for work experience and/or training is another area that should be explored.
- **Grade 11-16 Component.** College-admission and course-placement standards need to be simplified and coordinated with P-12 standards. Sanctions against institutions that fail to participate in this process could range from barring the use of tuition accounts at the uncooperative institution to having the institution be responsible for all remediation costs. The student report card system established at the early childhood level and continuing through high school should be an integral part of determining if students are prepared for higher education.

Being ready for the next level of education should be the goal of students, parents and teachers at every level. One goal of a P-16 seamless system is altering the existing culture in the education establishment that harbors disdain for other levels or sectors of the system. Each level should be held accountable for ensuring that the knowledge and skills needed for success are stated clearly and incorporated into outcome objectives for the prior level. For example, the K-12 system should be a central judge of the effectiveness of higher education's teacher preparation programs.

Higher education has the furthest to go, but also the most to gain in altering this culture. Postsecondary institutions need to recognize that the cadre of students with prepaid tuition accounts coming their way will have different levels of readiness, different sets of needs and the ability to exercise enrollment options. An ivory tower with a "one-size-fits-all" sign in the window may find new competitors springing up on all sides.

Policy Leadership

Elected and appointed policymakers who choose to carry the P-16 flag must define and carry out a strategy to bring about major change in the face of long-established traditions and an entrenched bureaucracy. Achieving consensus is not easy, and too much compromise can weaken a well-conceived plan. When the process gets weighted down by the politics of trying to satisfy those who resist, the promise of reform is lost.

In the late 1990s, Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton led the drive for a major postsecondary reform effort in his state. The lessons learned from this experience later were incorporated into a 1999 ECS report entitled, *Transforming Postsecondary Education for the 21st Century: The Nuts and Bolts of Policy*

Leadership. These lessons will be of interest to policymakers interested in pursuing P-16 reform. Among the major points:

- **Identify needs and articulate a vision.** The task is to articulate a vision for and about the state's citizens, not about the education enterprise. The challenge is to identify conditions that must be changed to benefit the citizens and society as a whole.
- **Build a consensus around the need to realize the vision.** Policy leadership is about creating consensus, not finding it. It is about defining and giving voice to issues and then taking steps to ensure that others come to understand and appreciate the problem -- although not necessarily the solution -- in a similar way.
- **Stay "on message" and maintain the focus.** Issues of strategic importance to a state and its citizens seldom are resolved quickly. Progress requires concerted action over extended periods of time. The responsibility of policy leaders is to maintain focus on the agenda, ensure progress is monitored and reported, and encourage mid-course corrections in the application of implementation tools.
- **Align the implementation tools.** The obligation is to ensure that the tools available (funding, regulation, delegation of decisionmaking authority and accountability mechanisms) are wielded in ways that are mutually reinforcing and oriented toward achieving the desired ends. Too often, states and competing leadership groups take up parts of the agenda, but cannot sustain the momentum.

The Administrative and Oversight Process

The enactment of a P-16 law or a series of incremental steps is an important beginning, but unless plans for administering and overseeing the process are included, the end goal may never be realized. Assuming that the preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary delivery systems can carry out this reform using existing governance structures may be ill-advised. Assuming that the reform can be carried out without their help also is ill-advised.

When states enacted mega-reform bills in the 1980s, several created oversight committees consisting of representatives from their executive and legislative branches. Some of these states experienced success, while others fell prey to interest-group politics and turf battles. One state created dual oversight committees (one for each political party) -- a move that later had to be undone.

Criteria for oversight committee selection might include the following:

- Overlapping terms capable of bridging the gaps created by term limits
- Bipartisan and nonpartisan
- A staff leader with administrative skills and the ability to implement plans without getting caught in political traps, interest-group politics and other obstacles
- Annual reporting to the state, including recommendations for changes to the existing education code or system improvements.

The Bottom Line

It is to be expected and encouraged that states will take different approaches to implementing a P-16 system. Rural states losing population, for instance, may want to limit the tuition accounts to in-state colleges, thereby encouraging students to stay in the state.

Parental support may be gained from the above-mentioned college tuition accounts and the standards-based student report cards. If families can better understand that preparation for college and work begins early in life, they will help promote and support the P-16 concept.

The concept of college tuition accounts also has the potential to attract attention from the business community. In Brookline, Massachusetts, a new company called Upstart has combined the college-savings plan with a frequent-flyer twist -- allowing families to register up to 10 credit cards with rebates of

up to 10% kicked back into the students' college-savings plans. Similar plans are being developed in other parts of the country. The potential for tapping some of this interest for funding school-based incentives and contributors to individual student accounts is great and could be a natural outgrowth of the P-16 concept.

Other aspects of P-16 could prove to be controversial. The idea of changing the high school attendance period by two years, for instance, is likely to give rise to a variety of questions and concerns. For example, tax-watchdog groups might argue that two years of per-pupil spending ought to be returned to taxpayers; other groups might advocate shifting these savings to early childhood programs. In the short term, there could be an increase in college enrollment that might take several years to even out. It is not inconceivable that adoption of the P-16 concept could produce the need for a whole new state funding mechanism, one that covers all of P-16.

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